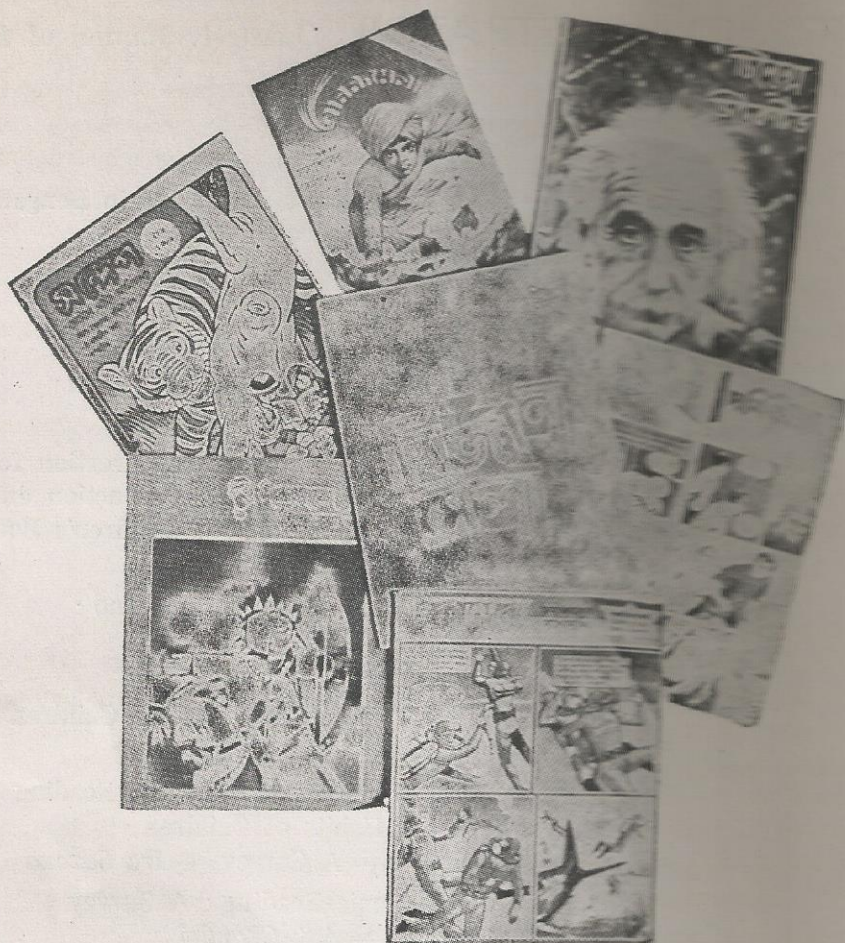




Children's Magazines in Bengali

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When I was a child had any one ever asked me whether I preferred a children's magazine to a book (of the same size, needless to say!), I'd have promptly and unhesitatingly answered, "Yes." The reason for my choice could be summed up in a few brief sentences. To me, getting a book by a favourite author was like getting a slab of chocolate, the delight of savouring it, though great, was predictable. Get-

ting a magazine, on the other hand, was like going to a party, where the very charm of the feast lay in its unpredictability; while I may or may not have liked the dishes, there was bound to be variety, novelty and surprises — three things so dear to all children.

When I was in school there were only a few magazines in Bengali. But they carried quality, imagination and the key to a

child's heart even if they lacked colour, gloss and sophistication in the modern sense. It seemed to me a major grievance that they made their welcome appearance just once a month. I can still remember with what eager impatience I awaited the postman at the beginning of each month. The most popular magazines for children then were *Shuktara* (The Morning-star), *Sishu Sathi* (Child's Companion), *Mouchak* (Beehive) and *Ramdhani* (The Rainbow). Each of us took a different one so that we might exchange them amongst ourselves. I can vividly recall how I nearly came to blows with my next-door friend Babu, who was an incredibly slow reader and took ages to get through his copy and Dipu, who had a tiresome trick of misplacing hers.

I had been out of touch with children's magazines in Bengali for nearly two decades. It was a shock to realise — during my recent survey done on behalf of AWIC — that the magazines which had once been so popular had either faded into oblivion or had for some reason or the other, stepped down from the lime-light, making room for fresher, newer and brighter rivals. But perhaps that was only to be expected!

The history of children's magazines in Bengali is a long and varied one. The first ever children's magazine in Bengali was started way back in 1822. *Pashwabali*, as it was named, mainly brought out little write-ups on animals. Before long other children's magazines also appeared. There was *Gyanoday* (the dawn of knowledge) which made its debut in 1831, *Vidya Darpan* (the mirror of learning) which arrived in 1853, *Satya Pradip* (the lamp of truth) which came in 1860 and *Abodh Bandhu* (friend of the ignorant) which came into being in 1873. There were a few more similar ones. The main object of these magazines, as obvious from their names, was to educate and instruct the

child rather than entertain him

After a gap of nearly twenty years a new kind of children's magazine made its welcome appearance — a kind that recognised the child's right to be amused and entertained as well as instructed and educated. The very titles of these new magazines proclaimed their fresh outlook. There came *Mukul* (the bud) edited by Shib Nath Shastri (in 1895), *Balak* (the boy) edited by the Tagores of Jora Sanko (1885), *Sakha* (friend) edited by Pramada Charan Sen in 1883 which was later merged with another magazine *Sathi* (companion) and came to be known as *Sakha-O-Sathi* (friend and companion).

All these magazines contained stories (both short and serialised ones), poems, articles on science and various other subjects of interest to children. They contained writings by famous authors, poets, artists, philosophers and scientists such as Abanindra Nath Tagore, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Shib Nath Shastri, Jagadish Chandra Bose, Ramendra Sunder Trivedi, Bipin Chandra Pal, Ramananda Chattopadhyay, Nabakrishna Bhattacharya, Upendra Kishor Roy Choudhury and so on.

The Beginnings

In 1913 Upendra Kishor Roy Choudhury ushered in a new era when he started his *Sandesh* (the name of a popular sweetmeat in Bengal). The name itself suggested how the children reacted to the new magazine. It was not a sugar-coated pill to broaden one's knowledge but a luscious sweet to be loved, savoured and relished from cover to cover. The 'instruction' was very much there but as an integral part of the sweet—significantly present but not obviously so.

Sandesh contained all that a youngster could possibly want and expect of a magazine—stories (folk-tales, original tales and tales from other lands); poems; interest-

ing write-ups about the world around, its varied aspects, flora and fauna; puzzles, riddles, jokes and plays. Everything except contributions from children. Probably no one ever thought of such a thing in those days. After Upendra Kishor his son Sukumar Roy became the editor and kept up the tradition and the high standard set by his father. *Sandesh* continued to be as popular as ever. But unfortunately Sukumar died at a very early age. His brother Subinoy carried on the editorship for a while but gave it up before long.

In 1920 yet another new children's magazine—*Mouchak* (Bee-hive) edited by Sudhir Sarkar—came into the market. Nearly all the leading writers of the day contributed to it, making it a very popular magazine. It became doubly so after *Sandesh* disappeared from the market. Though serialised stories had appeared in magazines since the days of *Sakha-O-Sathi*, *Mouchak* kept the tradition alive by serialising a good many stories, nearly all of which became best-sellers later on. Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyay's *Chander Pahar*, Hemendra Kumar Roy's *Jakher Dhan*, Meghduter Marteyagaman, and Premankur Atarthi's *Mahasthabir Jatak* are some of them.

Poetry had always formed an important part of children's magazines. Poet of renown—such as Rabindra Nath Tagore, Satyendra Nath Dutta, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Kumud Rajan Mullick, Gulam Mustapha, Bande Ali Mia, Narendra Deb and Sunirmal Bose—all wrote for children. *Mouchak* was followed by three other magazines—*Ramdhanu* (Rainbow), *Sishu-Sathi* and *Shuktara*—all of which became quite popular and provided openings for a number of new and talented writers.

The Present

In recent times, the two most popular and widely circulated magazines for chil-

dren in Bengali are *Sandesh* and *Ananda Mela* (joyful fair). *Sandesh* was revived by Satyajit Ray, the son of Sukumar Roy, in 1961 and is jointly edited by himself, Lila Majumdar and Nalini Das. *Ananda Mela* is edited by Nirendra Nath Chakrabarti and *Shuktara* by Mudhu Sudan Mazumdar which has been irregular of late. It was very popular once and therefore deserves special mention. *Sandesh* and *Shuktara* are standard-sized magazines while *Ananda Mela* is pocket-sized.

The content of all three magazines is satisfactory, covering a wide range of subjects likely to attract children of different temperaments and different levels of intelligence.

Poems

While poetry seems to be gradually receding to the background in many languages, it still occupies a position of significance in all three magazines. Both *Sandesh* and *Shuktara* have kept up the tradition of starting each issue with a poem. Although this is not done in *Ananda Mela*, the magazine itself usually contains a couple of poems. *Sandesh* carries about half a dozen poems of various types and *Shuktara* at least three.

Stories

Stories, of course, form the chief attraction of these three magazines. *Sandesh* carries at least one serialised story while the other two carry two or even three serialised stories. The serialised adventures of Tarzan have been one of the chief reasons for *Shuktara*'s popularity over the years. Both *Sandesh* and *Shuktara* carry at least five short stories in each issue, while *Ananda Mela* carries two or three.

The stories cover a wide range of subjects: humorous stories; stories of adventure, escape, discoveries and explorations; popular legends, folk-tales; stories from

history and famous books or interesting biographical or autobiographical write-ups. *Sandesh* also has read-aloud stories for little ones.

Comics

Next come the comics or picture-stories. *Ananda Mela* usually has about half-a-dozen comic-strips (including foreign ones such as *Rin Tin*, *Revers Ray*, *Tarzan*, etc); *Shuktara*, about four (including at least one foreign comic). Picture stories do not form a regular feature of *Sandesh*.

Articles

All three magazines carry at least one article of general interest every month. It may be on science or any other aspect of general knowledge. In *Ananda Mela* this is accompanied by photographs (in colour as well as in black and white). *Sandesh* has a special corner for nature-lovers.

All three magazines attach great importance to the world of sports. Every issue carries at least three articles on the different sports that are popular in India: cricket, football, badminton, hockey, tennis, etc, and are accompanied by many photographs. *Ananda Mela* often carries coloured blow-ups of the players. The articles may be about some aspect of these games or they may cover a particular match or a player.

Children's Contributions and Special Features

The magazines also carry a page for puzzles and riddles of various kinds. In addition *Ananda Mela* has a column for jokes, and *Sandesh*, one entitled 'Do you Know' where uncommon facts are briefly but interestingly stated.

Both *Sandesh* and *Ananda Mela* carry a good many contributions by the children—a fact that greatly adds to the popularity of these two magazines. *Shuktara* does not

have a regular 'children's corner' but it organises a short-story competition every month and the two prize-winning stories are published.

Sandesh devotes a page or two to answering the letters written by the children, but the other two magazines do not. *Ananda Mela* features articles specially meant for students. This includes helpful tips from school teachers, guide to good language and tips on writing good English, all of which are said to be quite helpful. *Ananda Mela* also has an occasional column on things to make and do.

All three magazines are profusely illustrated. While *Sandesh* and *Shuktara* feature pictures in black and white only, *Ananda Mela* provides coloured illustrations and coloured photographs as well.

Other Magazines

Besides the three magazines just analysed, there are at least half a dozen others of practically the same kind; *Pak-khiraj* (edited by Premendra Mitra); *Jhalmal* (edited by S. Bhattacharya and N. Aich); *Tepantar* (edited by Nirmalendu Gautam); *Kishor Bharati* (edited by D. Chatterjee); and some others. *Mouchak*, *Ramdhanu* and *Shishu-Sathi*, though reduced to a bare shadow of their past, continue to have an existence of sorts.

These magazines also contain poems, stories, serial stories, picture stories, articles on science, general knowledge, sports, riddles, puzzles and contributions by children.

Two of the science magazines for children are *Kishor Gyan-Vigyan* and *Vigyan-mela*. The first one, edited by Samarjeet Kar, has an attractive get-up and carries various kinds of science features. This includes science-fiction (original and translations) and articles covering varied aspects of science such as biology, geology, botany, chemistry, etc; stories of famous

discoveries, episodes from the lives of scientists, science puzzles, strange facts, comics or science fiction and things to make and do. A sure favourite for children interested in science. *Vigyan Mela* is a rather watered-down version of *Kishor Gyan-Vigyan*.

Children's Detective, edited by Amitava Sen merely features stories of adventure, mystery, suspense, detection and the supernatural. Some of these are original while some are translations of well-known stories. Needless to say, the magazine has limited appeal and a limited number of readers. Some mini-magazines for children are also in the market. *Chhotoder Katha* is one of them.

Observations

While studying the magazines for children I really wondered why some magazines are more popular than others, when the contents have a similar pattern and are tackled more or less the same way. Why, for instance, were *Sandesh* and *Shuktara* so popular while *Pakkhiraj* and *Tepantar* had made so little impact on the market in spite of being very similar?

The popularity and the huge sale of *Ananda Mela* can be easily explained: it is the only magazine in Bengali with coloured pictures and photographs and who can deny the importance of visual appeal where children are concerned? There is a world of difference between comics in colour and comics in black and white, between blow-ups and photographs in these two. Its hardly surprising if a child opts for colour. But that is not all. It also contains a satisfying range of contents. Moreover, *Ananda Mela* belongs to a flourishing publishing house with well-organised sale link-ups. What more does a magazine need? So far as privileges and opportunities go, *Ananda Mela* stands apart from all the rest. When I asked the

children why they read *Ananda Mela* the replies were very similar—"Because it is in colour, has nice stories, many comics, good photographs, specially of players and because it is so easily available. One does not have to hunt for it."

Sandesh, in spite of its lack of obvious visual appeal, is just as popular with children, if not more so. Why did the children go for it in such a big way? Here too the answer was unanimous. "For Satyajit Ray and his stories of Phalu-da, professor Shanku and anything else that he may write. Leela Majumdar is very good too." "But supposing both of them stopped writing for *Sandesh*—would you read it still?" I asked. "Of course not!" came the unhesitating answer, "There can't be any *Sandesh* without Satyajit Ray and Leela Majumdar. Take them away and it will be like any ordinary magazine with nothing special about it!"

I was somewhat puzzled about the popularity of *Shuktara*. If you took away the cover, you couldn't really distinguish it from, say, *Pakkhiraj* or *Jhalmal*. Then how did one account for its large circulation? Here too the children provided me with the answer. Most of them took it because it had been their daddy or mummy's favourite magazine when they were children.

Conclusion

In spite of the large number and variety in the children's magazines of today and in spite of all the added gloss, colour and sophistication, children's magazines no longer mean what they once meant to the children of the past. A modern child has a great deal to amuse him and to take up his attention. A magazine is just one of them. That is why it cannot possibly hold his interest unless it is exceptionally good. The modern children have no use for mediocre, run-of-the-mill stories.

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